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CONTINUING

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IN our study of the spiritual element in the Bible we touch the central source and secret of its amazing power. The historical background is important to such a degree that its study, in the light of recent exploration and discovery, has in many instances almost revolutionized our conception of the author and his book. The Gospels are no longer suspended in the air. The study of the land where the Saviour wrought and taught, of the people with whom he mingled, of their customs, habits, and peculiarities, as perpetuated among their descendants to-day, has given the world a "fifth gospel" outside of the Bible. The prophets have stepped out from an obscure part as living men endowed with intense and lofty personality. They are revealed not only as inspired reformers whose clarion voices summon their people to repentance and faith, but as unselfish patriots, as judicious and clear-sighted statesmen, whose divine mission and native sagacity thrust them as central and conspicuous figures into the complicated and turbulent politics of their day. Moreover the spirit of a living criticism has breathed upon the dry bones of their prophecies, and, lo, the disjointed and scattered fragments have come together, bone to his bone, form and beauty have clothed them, and again they glow and pulsate with their pristine life. Even in the case of the Apocalypse, that most mysterious and perplexing among the canonical books, whose writer seems at first sight to be wholly out of touch with his own age, and to be projecting his visions into an illimitable future, one thing is clear; whatever significance his message has for us, or for nations yet unborn, his oracles took shape and color from the

momentous conflicts and perils of his own age, and were addressed first of all (and perhaps altogether in the seer's own thought) to the men with whom he stood face to face, and this fact gives at least a firm starting point for their interpretation. The service thus rendered by historical criticism in revivifying these obscure writings has been inestimable. But when the utmost shall have been accomplished in this direction, criticism will only have constructed a firmer historical background for the spiritual element in the foreground.

LITERARY criticism has a function in Bible study as great, if not greater, than historical criticism. Problems of authorship, date and purpose must be considered. Each book must be interpreted as far as possible from the point of view of its writer. Distinctive types of style, such as history, legislation, poetry, doctrine are to be noted, the exact sense of words and phrases to be ascertained, and grammatical peculiarities to be explained. This, however, is only a preparation for a higher appreciation of a book as literature. We are charmed by the idyllic simplicity and freshness of the early Hebrew traditions, by the kingly dignity and power of the Davidic psalms, and by the practical philosophy and good sense of the wisdom literature. Paul grasps us by the might of his intellect, and we are swept along on the resistless current of his reasonings. We endeavor to sound the lucid depths of the Johannean writings, and the plummet at once floats in an abyss. From a purely literary point of view, what writer of ancient times more richly rewards a close and sympathetic study than Isaiah? He is *facile princeps* among the prophets, but his greatness here is fully paralleled by his greatness in the world of literature. However long one may be tempted to linger in admiration over the beauty of his style, the transparency and simplicity of his thought, the strength and purity of his emotion, the uniform majesty of his language, the grandeur of his poetic imagery, the amazing sweep of his prophetic vision, and the variety and energy of his eloquence, these are only the decorations of the outer court through which one passes into the inner sanctuary of the spirit. When Isaiah writes he is not bent

on making an immortal contribution to the world's literature. He is as unconscious of the exquisite felicities of his style and the majestic strength of his diction, as the water bubbling up from a mountain spring is unconscious of its sparkling purity. As it flows forth because it cannot do otherwise, so the prophet is driven by an inward impulse to communicate his message—the divine word that surges in his soul with a power as irresistible as that of the tides. The rhetorical garment in which the message clothes itself occasions him the smallest possible solicitude. The message itself, the word of Jehovah, the eternal spiritual truth is everything. What is thus true of Isaiah is true in corresponding measure of every other inspired writer. In these days when men are so often dazzled by the brilliant results of historical criticism, and when sacred literature is studied so largely simply as literature, the temptation to rest here becomes very strong, as though these things were ends in themselves rather than means to a higher end. He who misses the spiritual element in the Bible misses its heart and essence. To him its living personalities become only interesting figures in a great historical movement; its lofty poetic strains only as “a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument.” Historical and literary criticism are of inestimable worth when tributary to a fuller and more sympathetic apprehension of the spiritual contents of the Bible. Otherwise they are as the chaff to the wheat.

SINGULARLY enough, historical and literary criticism which should have been conspicuous helps for strengthening of faith in the Bible, have become among the most potent means for disturbing it. In the hands of those who are inimical to revealed truth, and desirous of eliminating from the Bible every supernatural element for the purpose of destroying its claims to a divine origin, these critical instruments have been employed with alarming efficacy in disintegrating certain prevailing orthodox conceptions of the Scriptures. The success has not been so signal as a hostile criticism has been forward in proclaiming. Illogical and confused ideas have been forced to the wall, indeed. *A priori* dicta

as to the divine method employed in producing an inspired literature, like similar dicta in respect to the creation of the world, have been abandoned as untenable in view of the incontrovertible facts hurled at them by the critics. Again and again the church has been forced to modify her traditional formulas, until to-day there seems scarcely any solid ground left to stand on. Many are trembling for the ark of God, as though it were on the point of falling wholly into the hands of the Philistines. That this result will not follow is quite certain. The more thoroughly the old *theories* are shaken, the more clearly does the *fact* of inspiration impress itself on every candid investigator. Even a poem like the Song of Solomon, which only the most perverse and despotic traditionalism can twist into an allegory representing Christ and the Church, instead of a simple oriental love-song, exhibits to the fair-minded reader a theme and an occasion abundantly worthy of being illuminated by inspiration. Theories, interpretations, creeds and formulas, so venerable and decrepit as almost to be themselves regarded as inspired, are fast crumbling into dust. They are only human scaffoldings that the storm will sweep away. By and by men will rejoice when they see the temple of truth stand out against the horizon in fairer outlines. They lament now only because they mistake the scaffoldings for the temple itself. So it will come to pass that these agencies of historical and literary criticism, now regarded with sore misgivings, will turn out after all to be God's harbingers of a brighter dawn, of a larger and truer conception of the nature and purpose of His revelation. The revelation itself will be more clearly apprehended, because the literature which embodies it is better understood. Through doubts, fears, and crises, God leads His people into a larger faith.

THIS revelation, which is identical with the spiritual element in the Bible, converges in the person of Jesus Christ, and again radiates into the world of error and sin. He is the true Light which shineth in the darkness, and "which lighteth every man coming into the world." No study of the Bible is worth the name unless it promotes a better knowledge of him, and leads

the heart and will into loving submission to him. Time and again a hostile criticism has audaciously announced that it has resolved the Light of the World into the light of common day. But the light only shines with greater and steadier radiance as the centuries roll away. The historic Christ remains the central figure in the world's history. However men may hate him or oppose him, they are coming more and more to recognize in him the possible solution of their desperate problems. Men who are groping their way out of the darkness, whose lives have been embittered by the inequalities of life, who have conceived of the Church as leagued with their oppressors, and of her ministers as hirelings of the rich, are looking behind ministers and churches to the Master himself, and announcing that they discover in him the great friend of humanity, whose teachings when rescued from the accretions of a speculative theology and given a chance to operate in society, will introduce the long-looked-for day of social deliverance and human rights.

Christianity itself seems to be in a transition stage toward a more spiritual and living apprehension of the teachings of its Founder. There was a time when orthodox religion consisted chiefly in external conformity to a ritualistic worship. Then came a period of intellectual development, when doctrine was predominantly emphasized, and when salvation was primarily conditioned by dogmatic orthodoxy. This was the period of endless multiplication of sects and creeds. There is a third and final stage, that in which the chief emphasis is laid on a personal participation in the life of the Son of God. These stages may be characterized by the words, doing, believing, being. They do not supersede each other. Each higher takes up into itself the lower. The life and freedom of the spirit result in right living and correct thinking. We see, then, how the ultimate goal of all Bible study is the spiritual element in the book; how this spiritual element converges in Jesus Christ; and how the essence of Christianity, which consists in a personal participation in the divine life revealed and communicated by Christ, culminates in a worship wherein "the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth."